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Compiled and distributed by Michael C Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

for contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

Further Progress Towards Final Atlas

I did not have an ABBA Survey in spring this year, the first time since 1985 that I have missed spring in Arabia. Instead I concentrated on preparing draft species accounts for the final atlas. This task is progressing well but, as you might have guessed, is not going as fast as I would like. The data collection aspect of the project has not diminished at all and without a doubt there is still a great need for more data. There are plans in hand for the database to be improved and taken forward even after the atlas is published, this will ensure that this valuable resource on bird distribution and breeding in Arabia is available to future researchers.

There are also major changes going on to restructure the database and to make it more flexible, with better quality prints and more detailed maps. The restructured database, when complete, will be able to produce maps with different coloured symbols to denote age of records. This will allow a quick visual assessments of range extensions and contractions. There will also be the facility to produce maps by choosing the BECs which are most relevant to a particular circumstance. This will be useful to distinguish the status of those species that are both migrants and breeding birds in Arabia. For example the map of the turtle dove is confused by this dual status. On regular maps BECs 00, 01, 03 are unsafe for a species like this because of the presence of migrants. However with the new system a map could be prepared showing records with BEC 2 (migrants do not normally make breeding calls) plus BECs 4 and above.

It is hoped that a publisher will be agreed soon which will allow important final decisions to be made on format and presentation. The task is well under way to prepare small world range maps for each species to accompany the species account and atlas map. Also artwork is being commissioned from a number of artists for the line drawings that will accompany each account.

I cannot emphasise to much that there is still a great need for records and especially detailed observations of breeding and species requirements such as food and habitat. Those observers who have still not sent in their reports for 1998 are asked to do so soon and preferably before the new breeding season gets under way. If anyone is short of forms just let me know. Would all observers (past and present) please note the challenge in this issue to complete coverage of those squares not yet atlassed (page 4), and note that some relatively common species are still very poorly recorded (page 5).

I regularly get requests for the *Interim Atlas*. Unfortunately I have no further stocks but they can still be ordered from Prof Abdulaziz Abuzinada, Secretary General, NCWCD, P O Box 61681, Riyadh 11575, Saudi Arabia. The price is £8 which includes postage and packing.

Michael Jennings

Fig 1. Two nests of striated scops owl *Otus brucei*, were found with young in the UAE during 1998, one at Kalba (WA26) in May and the other at Dubai in June (P Castell and S Aspinall).

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National Commission for Wildlife
Conservation and Development (NCWCD)
P.O.Box 61681, Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

الإشراف والنشر بواسطة
الهيئة الوطنية لحماية الحياة الفطرية
وإنمائها.
ص ب ٦١٦٨١، الرياض،
المملكة العربية السعودية

Announcements and Requests for Information

Nestlings

In preparing the recent new edition of the *Collins Field Guide to Birds Nests , Eggs and Nestlings of Britain and Europe, with North Africa and the Middle East*, Colin Harrison and I were unable to include full descriptions of the nestlings of several species breeding in the Middle East, including:

> Hume's tawny owl, Dunn's lark, bar-tailed desert lark, thick-billed lark, long-billed pipit, hooded wheatear, Hume's wheatear, black-headed bush shrike, fan-tailed raven, Tristram's grackle, yellow-throated sparrow, Syrian serin, Sinai rosefinch and house bunting.

It is possible that readers of *Phoenix* may have information or photographs of these nestlings (ideally close up with mouths gaping wide). If so I shall be grateful to receive any information.

Peter Castell, Fairlawn, 679 Chester Road, Great Sutton, South Wirral, L66 2LN.

Ringed Ospreys in the Red Sea

Ospreys are common in the Red Sea with a minimum estimate of 1000 breeding pairs, however we still have no idea where juvenile birds disperse to, and to what extent ospreys are sedentary . During the winter breeding season of 1994/5 and 1995/6 I was involved in a study in which 140 juvenile ospreys were banded with colour rings in the Farasan archipelago, southern Red Sea . Ospreys were banded with two colour rings placed on the left tarsus and an NCWCD incoloy ring (K000***) placed on the right tarsus. It is likely that some of these banded ospreys dispersed along the Saudi and Yemen coasts of the Red Sea and possibly to the Eritrean islands and coastline. The earliest breeding ospreys lay eggs at the start of November and therefore a number of ospreys (including colour ringed birds) will now be associated with nesting territories. I would appreciate it if any observer who sees any colour banded ospreys in the region would send me details of the colours of bands, location, date and any other relevant details.

Paul Fisher, Quarryknowe, Hamnavoe, Burra, Shetland, Scotland ZE2 9LA.. Email <paulr.fisher@zetnet.co.uk>

BirdLife International : New head of Middle East Division

Adnan Budieri has been appointed to the post of Head of BirdLife's Middle East Division and will be operating from their new office in Amman, Jordan. Adnan takes over from Richard Porter, at BirdLife's HQ in Cambridge, as part of a decentralising process to make BirdLife's activities more regionally based.

Adnan has worked as a senior conservationalist for a number of years with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature in Jordan. He has much experience of the region and is looking forward to developing new BirdLife links and conservation actions, especially in Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran, as well as building on those already in existence in Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.

In February he will be organising a three day workshop in Jordan to which a number of Arab conservationalists have been invited. The workshop will determine the BirdLife Conservation Strategy for the Middle East for the next five years.

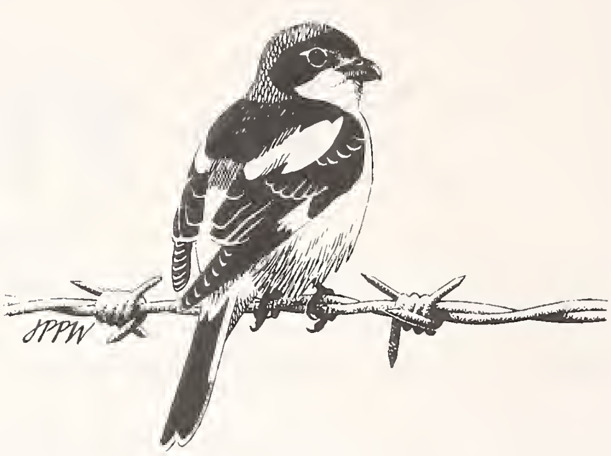


Fig 2. There have been summer records of woodchat shrike *Lanius senator* in the UAE this year; breeding is a possibility, a few years ago juveniles were seen in July (C Richardson).

Websites:

The UAE's *Twitchers' Guide* - A Free Public Information Service

Twitchers Guide is a weekly column that appears in *Emirates News*, the UAE government's English language newspaper. It collates all bird sightings reported in the UAE over the preceding week and began over four years ago, sparked off by the sighting of an Eversmann's Redstart in a public garden in the capital, Abu Dhabi. It appears on Thursdays and thus gives UAE residents time to plan their weekend excursions, should they wish to try to see any of the birds noted in the previous few days.

Such has been the growth in interest in the birdlife of the UAE since that time, especially from overseas birdwatchers planning to visit the country during migration periods or in the winter months, that *Twitchers Guide* has now been posted on the Ministry of Information website.

"Twitchers" as it is popularly known, is essentially a public information service, admittedly a specialist one, but, judging by the numbers of "hits" to the Ministry website, is particularly valuable for trip planning. Although there is a certain bias toward rare bird sightings, other information routinely included comprises breeding bird records, survey results, for example of the annual midwinter Asian Waterfowl Census, interesting observations on migration, conservation snippets and so on.

Anyone visiting the UAE can contribute to *Twitchers' Guide*. The UAE is a small country and has only a small resident population of dedicated birders (all of whom have to work) so the records generated by visitors are especially sought after.

Contributions can be accepted by telephone, fax or e-mail (trip reports gratefully received this way). All records are subsequently vetted and stored by the Emirates Bird Records Committee (EBRC) and the usual *caveat* applies that appearance of a record in

Twitchers' Guide should not be taken as it having been officially accepted. Researchers and others should note this and always refer to the EBRC for an update. Twitchers is merely a rapidly produced *aide-memoire* intended to foster a greater interest in the country's birds, apart from being a lot of fun.

You can find *Twitchers' Guide* on the Ministry of Information website: *www.uaeinteract.com.ae* or alternatively if you subscribe, on *EuroBirdnet*.

For supplying bird news please use: Tel 02-4091564/451446; fax 02-453963 or e-mail: <*phellyer@emirates.net.ac*> (Please submit your records during your visit if you can but if not as soon as possible afterwards).

Simon Aspinall, PO Box 791, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Oman and Arabia Natural History Page

Martin Fisher in Oman has set up a new website, *http://www.oman.org/nath00.htm* which covers a wide range of subjects relative to Oman and Arabian natural history. Still under development the present pages provide a natural history reading list and contacts and hypelinks by subjects. *Email:* <*martinf@squ.edu.om*>.

ERWDA's Website

The Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, Abu Dhabi is developing a website, *http://www.erwda.gov.ae* . Enquiries to Theri Bailey, email <*narc@emirates.net.ae*>.

Breeding of Pallid Swift in The UAE

Pallid swift *Apus pallidus* breeds commonly and usually colonially in Dubai and the Northern Emirates. It nests most frequently in traditional buildings, such as mosques, forts and wind-towers as well as coastal and mountain cliffs, caves and ravines. Colonisation of Abu Dhabi island is probably recent with many dozen if not hundreds of pairs nesting in modern and sometimes part-built tower-blocks, along the corniche and elsewhere in the city. Natural nest sites seem few and far between but include fissures in rocky outcrops along the Abu Dhabi coast west to Shuweihat (SA25) and on one or two islands with similarly suitable features. Most of these 'colonies' comprise only one or two pairs.

The breeding season in the UAE extends from November to about late June, northern colonies starting earliest. Arrival is latest in Abu Dhabi. This constant difference has been a puzzle for some time and continues to be so. Breeding in Mediterranean Europe, and north of the Arabian Gulf in Iran and Pakistan is 'conventionally' that of a long-distance Palearctic migrant, ordinarily from May or June onward dependent on latitude, with double-brooding apparently typical in the Mediterranean basin.

Islets of the East Coast, primarily in Fujairah emirate, have been reported (notably by Aspinall 1996 - *Status and Conservation of Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates*) to support large nesting colonies. However, recent observations show that the birds there are only feeding, although the prey remains unidentified. Observation of many hundreds of birds failed to record a single landing attempt and in any event there are no suitable crevices. Moreover birds left the area with bulging throat pouches after actively feeding around these rocks. The length of time individual birds stayed to feed is not known but there was certainly a minimum of 2000 around the islets during visits in March, May and June in 1997 and again in February 1998.

After feeding, birds invariably departed almost due westwards (and whilst none would be expected to go east, none went north or south either). As far as could be seen birds gained sufficient altitude to clear the mountains and it is speculated that their breeding sites lay in towns west of the mountains and not in the mountains themselves. The nearest known breeding localities are in buildings in Dhaid and Ras al Khaimah city. Could the swifts be making food gathering flights in excess of a 100 km round-trip? This seems very likely.

Both sexes are known to provision the young, and unless parents forage together, staggered feeding could take place every 45 minutes at the Dhaid colonies. This is on the basis of 90 minute foraging trips; comprised of 75 minutes round trip at a flying speed of 80 km/hr and 15 minutes intensive food collecting, although the latter may last longer. Feeding visits at colonies, in Gibraltar for example, have been shown to be made every hour or more frequently (Cramp & Simmons 1985, *The Birds of the Western Palaearctic. Vol 4*), although foraging is probably close by, with no flying time lost and with only a relatively minor energy drain on the adults. Even allowing for one hour of active feeding, Dhaid nestlings could still be fed every 65 minutes or so. Against this, however, must be weighed the adult's own energy balance. Clearly they must take time to feed themselves along the way. By deduction the equation can presumably only balance if food is superabundant around the stacks along the Fujairah coast.

One further point is that it may be possible to estimate the local breeding population from these observations at Fujairah. Allowing for a percentage of non-breeders in the foraging flocks off Fujairah, and for a turnover of birds, and assuming that only one bird of a pair forages at a time, at least 2000 pairs is a minimum population for the northern emirates. It is not being suggested thought that the entire northern emirates population feeds at the east coast, or even that birds from further afield still do not fly to the same islets.

Why the Fujairah islets should be so rich as feeding station is a mystery but at least it now seems clear that swifts do not breed there. The pallid swift, like most other swifts, remain poorly studied, especially in respect of its feeding and migratory movements. Time to develop an ultra-lightweight satellite tag?

Simon Aspinall, PO Box 791, Abu Dhabi, UAE.
Email <phellyer@emirates.net.ae>.

Gambaga Flycatchers Use Same Nest Site Two Years Running

On 18 May 1997 I noticed a pair of Gambaga flycatchers *Muscicapa gambagae* on the campus of Sana'a International School. After discreet observation the birds led me to there nest which was situated in the fork of a 'pepper tree' (scientific name not known), 2.3 m above ground level. The nest was constructed in the form of a cup about 9 cm across and 6 cm deep (exterior dimensions). It was built primarily of dried grasses and very thin twigs and blended in very well with the contours and colour of the fork in which is was built. The fork had three branches, two of which supported the nest whilst the third and thickest formed a natural canopy over the nest.

On 2 June the nest contained a single downy offspring. I followed the development of the chick until 17 June, at which time I left on my summer vacation. The young bird was still nest-bound at this time. By the time I returned in late August, the flycatchers were gone but the nest remained in situ. A close examination revealed that it was not lined with any special material.

On 7 May 1998 I again spotted a pair of Gambaga flycatchers at the same location. A week later they were nesting in exactly the same spot as the previous year and it appeared that they were utilising the same nest that had been used in the previous season with perhaps. minor maintenance. Although I had no proof that they were the same birds I suspected that they were. Unfortunately when I returned to the site the following week, a predator (presumably human) had destroyed the nest and the two speckled blue eggs it contained lay on the ground nearby. The flycatchers abandoned the site following the destruction of the nest. A second site, if one was chosen, was not located.

David Stanton, PO Box 2002, Sanaa, Yemen. Email <DavidStanton@qsi.org>.

Valuable Prizes for Records from Remaining Unatlassed Squares

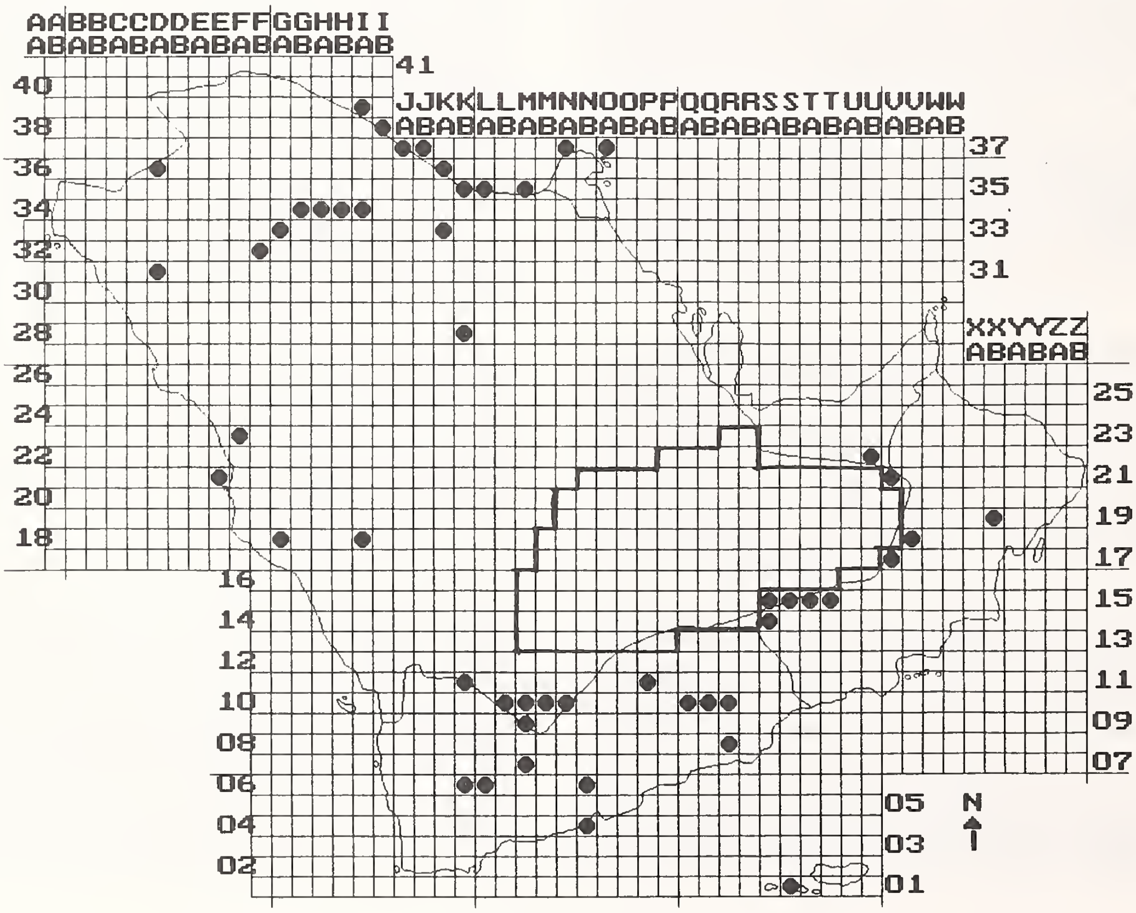
Outside the core Empty Quarter area there are surprisingly few ABBA squares for which there are no records at all. These squares are shown at Fig. 3. The race is now on to get records for these remaining squares. Observers past and present are asked to look carefully at these squares and check if they have been to any of them. If they have would they please report any observations to ABBA as soon as possible. If they have not been to the squares they might consider ways of how they can get to one or more in the 1999 breeding season to report breeding and potentially breeding birds. The list includes the very last UAE square, the last central Oman square and one or two in easy reach from major cities all over Arabia.

As an inducement to clearing up these gaps in knowledge various valuable prizes have been donated to encourage observers to get out to see some birds in these squares - and have a bit of fun in the process. Any observer who reports five or more species for any square will be awarded a free five year subscription to *Phoenix*. In addition further prizes are available for contributions to individual countries as follows; Oman = Oman Atlas, UAE = UAE bird book (mystery prize), Yemen = an annual free subscription to *Lammergeier* and Saudi Arabia = copy of the Saudi Arabian checklist. Anyone reporting on five squares or more also gets a free *Interim Atlas* (fast becoming a collectors item). The person reporting on the most new squares in Yemen gets copy of the *Field Guide to the birds of the Middle East*. Everyone can win.

The Empty Quarter remains largely unrecorded so anyone able to visit the core area (as shown on the map) should report everything they see in every square they visit.

ABBA shares all records with national recorders. Anyone reporting records should pass a copy of the ABBA report form to the national recorder. If you do not have details of the recorder please ask that it is copied on as appropriate.

Fig 3. Squares with a blob are those for which there are no records of any kind on the ABBA database. All observers are urged try to obtain records for these squares in 1999 - and win prizes.



Sand Partridge, Chick before the egg?

The sand partridge *Ammoperdix heyi* is one of the most familiar rocky desert birds and is widespread in this habitat over most of Arabia. I have recently produced the first draft of the species account for it and was disappointed to find that there is not a single record of a sand partridge nest with eggs for Arabia on the database. There are 472 records altogether and 64 of these confirmed breeding, but no eggs. Surely there is someone out there who has found the nest of this bird in Arabia? Or perhaps someone knows a published source with a nest with eggs record. (Not all published sources have been accessioned to the database yet). Plenty of books are available that tell us that they have a clutch size of so many eggs and lay in the months of so and so, but the original data for these references is doubtful and almost certainly are copied from other books which may have there origins outside of our region. Many standard regional works repeat this sort of data without making it clear that the information may relate to another geographical area or for a different race. The average clutch size of many birds that breed in Arabia is noticeably different from averages quoted for nearby regions, so it is important that the project has good information on all species.

If someone has found a nest with eggs please report it to the ABBA database, along with any further details such as where the nest was placed, and if there was a constructed nest the material it was constructed off, how many eggs it contained, sex of birds attending the nest and whatever other notes were made. With a bit of luck we could have a whole page of sand partridge nest data in *Phoenix* 16!

Fortunately there are plenty of records of 'day-old' chicks so the egg laying period can be predicted. However observations of chicks open up more questions about this species breeding biology. Like so many species in Arabia its basic breeding regimes are poorly understood. If they lay four to seven eggs (as seems to be the range most quoted) how do we regularly get broods of chicks of 10 or more, even up to 15. The possibility of broods combining is very likely but if that was the case one would expect at least occasionally to see large broods containing chicks of different sizes. When two females look after a large brood (or even a small brood) are they the females of two combined broods or is one non-breeding bird helping another adult? This is a well known regime for a number of species in impoverished habitats but little studied in Arabia. But what is going on when a large brood is only looked after by a male, or more perversely, two males. This species is crying out for a detailed study of its breeding.

Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some of the more interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds received within the last year. Some relate to earlier years. Not all these records have been verified and some may not yet be accepted by local recorders.

Jouanin's petrel ***Bulweria fallax***
One attracted to a light at night on Ras Shauab headland (TA02) Socotra, November 1997 (M Clouet and J L Goar).

Socotra cormorant ***Phalacrocorax nigrogularis***
More than 5000 on the sea to the north west of Socotra, November 1997 (M Clouet and J L Goar).

Greater flamingo ***Phoenicopterus ruber***
In 1998 again made nest mounds near Abu Dhabi, UAE (UB25) but failed to progress breeding (S Aspinall).

Ruddy shelduck ***Tadorna ferruginea***
Pair present at Ramtha tip area Sharjah (VA27) in May 97 and April 98 but as yet no better evidence of breeding in the UAE.

Black kite ***Milvus migrans***
One Socotra (UA02) November 1997 (M Clouet and J L Goar). First record for Socotra.

Socotra buzzard ***Buteo buteo***
Nest contained two eggs in a bush under an overhang at 650 m Haggier range Socotra (UA02) November 1997 (M Clouet and J L Goar).

Shikra ***Accipiter badius***
Another juvenile at Dubai (UA27) this year in early August (S Aspinall) - see *Phoenix* 14.

White-browed coucal ***Centropus superciliosus***
At least 12 individuals and three pairs of the Socotra subspecies were in dense vegetation at about 850 m on Socotra (UA02) November 1997 (M Clouet and J L Goar).

Turtle dove ***Streptopelia turtur***
A juvenile bird not yet fledged was picked up on Das island mid October 1998, it was so young it must have been raised on the island. This was the first breeding record for Das island and a very late breeding record (*Twitchers Guide for October 22nd 1998*).

Alexandrine parrakeet ***Psittacula eupatria***
Has come to a bird table in Jedda since 1997 (M Jenkins). First Jedda record.

Hume's owl ***Strix butleri***
Pair seen regularly at Kawkaban (JB07) Yemen highlands April 1998 (R Wranes).

Plain nightjar ***Caprimulgus inornatus***
Three or more calling Wadi Hajar (OA06) eastern Yemen 12 March 1998 (G & H Welch).

Pallid swift ***Apus pallidus***
Nine birds Qarnein Island (SB26) UAE, May 1998 at a time breeding would be expected. (S Aspinall).

White-collared kingfisher ***Halcyon chloris***
Pair seen several times to enter and leave a hole 1.5 m above ground in a mature mangrove tree at Khor Kalba (WA26) in May 1998. These must surely have been feeding young but food was not seen (P Castell).

Crag martin ***Ptyonoprogne rupestris***
Two seen aroud cliffs at Kawkaban (JB07) Yemen highlands late March 1998 (G & H Welch). Has never been proved to breed in Arabia but always worth keeping an eye open for.

Red-rumped swallow ***Hirundo daurica***
Old nest from 1997 and new nest with adults present, Masafi area (WA27) UAE (C Richardson).

White-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*
Observed in Jedda 1997 and now breeding there (M Jenkins).

Yemen thrush *Turdus menachensis*
Four or five pairs in a hotel garden at Abha (IA13) included nest building and feeding fledged young in late April 1998 (G Lobley).

Graceful warbler *Prinia Gracilis*
One arrived Das island September 1998 and stayed for a few days *(Twitchers Guide for September 3rd 1998).* This species is generally thought to be a sedentary species, the nearest breeding population is some 85 km away on Dalma island.

Booted warbler *Hippolais caligata*
A nest with three eggs was predated by a clamorous reed warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* at Kalba (WA27) UAE east coast (P Castell).

Brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis*
Empty nest found in mangroves on Siniyah island Ras al Khaimah (VB28), May 1998 (P Castell).

Bank mynah *Acridotheres ginginianus*
240 pairs found in seven colonies, all in wells, in Ras al Khaimah (VB28),May 1998 (P Castell).

Brahminy Mynah *Sturnus pagodarum*
Seen leaving a nest hole in a building from which twigs were protruding, Abu Dhabi, March 1998 (Abdul Hakim al Abdi).

Yemen Serin *Serinus menachensis*
Small populations were discovered in the Tawi Atayr area (UB11) of southern Oman by visiting caver S Polak in November 1997. Birds were nest building and frequenting nests in a cavern habitat. An amazing range extension for this Arabian endemic and a new bird for Oman.

Socotra bunting *Emberiza socotrana*
Individuals, pairs and small groups in the Haggier range (550-900 m), males singing and territorial and nest building thought to have been in progress, November 1997 (M Clouet and J L Goar).

New Periodicals

Al-Sambouk

Al-Sambouk is the newsletter of the Regional Organisation for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden or PERSGA. PERSGA was set up in 1995 as an international committee to coordinate actions between states affecting the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden basin. PERSGA oversees a wide ranging agenda of conservation and environmental issues, including the wise use of natural resources. The organisation has its headquarters in Jeddah and is developing a strategic action plan in conjunction with UNEP, UNDP and the World Bank. There are already a number of collaborative ventures ongoing between the eight signatory states. *Al-Sambouk* aims to inform all those interested in the marine environment of the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden of current and proposed initiatives, and reports on progress to date in conservation and protection of marine resources. The Red Sea has some 25,000 ship transits each year, many of which are loaded with oil; other ships unscrupulously clean out their tanks in the Red Sea. Consequently navigation and navigation pollution issues are an important concern and the organisation is working hard to set up an oil spill response centre and prepare contingency plans to deal with potential pollution incidents. Fisheries are also an important issue with which PERSGA is concerned. Fisheries have been a very important part of all Red Sea coastal communities for thousands of years. However in the space of a generation many such communities have moved from subsistence fishing to cash cropping the seas to supply big cites and international markets with fish and other marine food products. This change has fundamentally altered the economy of those communities, raised concerns for the conservation of some fish stocks and has had knock on effects for other wildlife. *Al-Sambouk* has included a number of articles on various aspect of the marine environment, including its fauna. The one bird paper to date concerned osprey studies. The first issue of *Al-Sambouk* is dated January 1996 and since then six more have appeared (to March 1998). Until now all issues have been in a simple newsletter style but there are plans to move this A4 publication more ‘up market’ to a format which will include colour photos and glossy paper. There are English and Arabic editions. *Al -Sambouk can be obtained from PERSGA P O Box 1358, Jeddah 21431, Saudi Arabia.*

Journals, Reports and other Publications

The following notes list some of the more interesting papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various Arabian natural history society newsletters and in other reports etc in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

Zoology in the Middle East (Vols 15 & 16 1997-98)

Two more very readable issues of *ZME*. The first has 17 papers, 11 on vertebrates. The three papers on birds concern diet of little owl in Jordan, migration of raptors in Yemen and new records of afrotropical species in Egypt. The sixteenth issue has 15 papers, ten of which concern vertebrates. These are divided geographically into seven for Turkey, five for Jordan and one each for Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt. The two bird papers concern Barn owl diet in Jordan and the habitat associations and communities of breeding birds in the highlands of south west Jordan. It is quite amazing that so many species of birds occur in this region that are not found as breeding birds anywhere in the Arabian peninsula. Of particular interest to those interested in Arabian mammals is a note on ratel (honey badger) predation on carnivores trapped for study in Saudi Arabia. Another important paper looks at the distribution of leatherback turtle records in the eastern Mediterranean. Papers are in English with German summaries. Both issues comprise 120 pages. *ZME is available from Max Kasparek Verlag, Bleichstr 1, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. Price DM27. ISSN 0939-7140.*

Oman Bird News 21 (Winter 97/8)

Another good read, this issue contains a couple of articles on birding in Oman, one group had 240 species in Dhofar in two weeks - is this a record? There is also a summary of the ill-fated ABBA survey 21 to central Oman. The OBRC annual report for 1997 includes under the ‘claims accepted’ three species new to the Sultanate, these are crested honey buzzard, South Polar skua and small skylark. The second part of the OBRC report is a list of selected records not necessarily adjudicated on yet. The OBRC record has now been entirely computerised and a report by the outgoing recorder (Jens Eriksen) summarises the number of records and activities over the years. The records currently received each year amount to about 10,000 records, of up to half a million birds of 300+ species. Finally a report on the January 1997 waterfowl count includes reports of some 95 species of about 350,000 birds. This issue has eight attractive colour plates. 21 pages. *Available from the Oman Bird Records Committee, PO Box 246, Muscat 113, Sultanate of Oman, at the price of £3, US$5 or ORis 2.*

Journal Saudi Arabian Natural History Society Volume 3 (7)

JSANHS Vol 3 No 7 (35 pages) appeared in December 1997. There are no notes on birds in this issue which has a heavy bias towards marine biology, with three articles on fish and one on coral. The other two articles concern flowers on Jebel Shada al Ala in the western highlands, which is reputed to hold 70% of all Arabian plants and community based conservation in the Jordan village of Dana. There has unfortunately been a schism in the SANHS which is based in Jedda. There are now two groups with the same name and journal. Hopefully this confusing situation will not last for much longer. The address of the original group is C/O Jeddah Preparatory School, C/O British Consulate-General, P O Box 6316, Jeddah 21442. Fax ++966-2-6937380

Arabian Wildlife Vol 3 No 3 1997/8

This "Coral Reef Special" celebrates 1997 as the year of the reef. It is entirely given over to the flora and fauna of reefs and their conservation. Reefs are a very important part of the Arabian environment - they surround Arabia on three sides. There is an introduction to Arabian reefs in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea which is followed by an article on hard and soft corals. Two contributions deal with conservation of the reef, including one of tips on how divers and boat users can avoid doing great damage unwittingly and the other on the protection of Oman's coral reefs. The full colour photography for which this periodical is renowned binges on probably the most colourful corner of the animal kingdom, the nudibranch sea slugs. Several of them slither their unbelievably flamboyant colour combinations and physical uniqueness across the pages. There is a short article on the corals found recently around the island of Socotra, an unexpected discovery as the cold up-welling in the area was thought to be hostile to the formation of corals. Shorter notes on the predatory tono shell, underwater photography, and new seas urchins, complete this most colourful issue to date. *Arabian Wildlife is available from Trident Press Ltd, 2-5 Old Bond Street, Mayfair, London WIX 3TB UK. Price £3.*

Tribulus 7.2

A range of articles on the conservation of fauna, flora and the environment within the UAE, also the archeology and hydrology of the area. Specific articles cover applying geographic information systems (GIS) technology to wildlife resource management, invertebrates along the Arabian Gulf coast and observations at a dhub lizard colony. Bird interest centres on a look at bird communities on the al Madam plain UAE. The regular bird report contains a lot of interest.

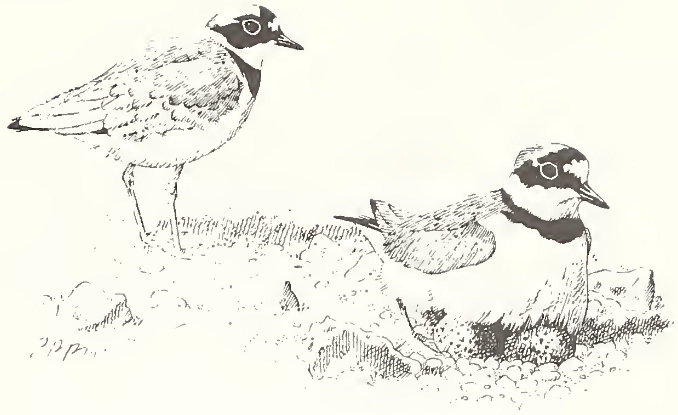


Fig 4. The little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius* is a species that has greatly expanded its Arabian breeding range during the ABBA period and is now found breeding in Oman, UAE, Qatar and all across northern Saudi Arabia.

Sandgrouse 19(2) and 20(1)

The first of these issues has plenty of Arabian interest. One on the geographical origins, identification, and taxonomy of large gulls (fuscus/argentatus) in the Arabian Gulf will be of great help to those (probably most people) who find this group difficult. Other papers deal with Red Data species for the UAE, habitats in the Yemen and reports of first national records (4 for Yemen and one for Oman). A variety of articles in this issue are scattered with 'Eriksens'. 160 pages. The first volume is 160 pages the second only 80 pages. The second has several papers and notes specifically relating to Arabia, including observations on the female houbara at the nest, the breeding and cooling behaviour of the hoopoe lark and birds of some Yemen Red Sea islands. Also notes great knot in Yemen, banded martin in Saudi Arabia, Arabian accentors, and pale rock sparrows. Both issues are complete with regular features all with plenty of Arabian interest.
Available from the Ornithological Society of the Middle East, c/o the Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, England.

Fauna of Saudi Arabia Vol 16: 1997

This volume (355 pages) contains 14 main papers, all but one relating to invertebrates (one each on corals and arachnids and 11 on insects). The major invertebrate papers are a review of the *Xeniid* corals of the Red Sea (including descriptions of six species new to science), a review of the grasshopper families *Pamphagidae* and *Pyrgomorphidae* in Arabia and notes on the *Heteroptera* bugs in Yemen (of which there are over 400 species). The vertebrate paper concerns the first record of a tripletail fish *Lobotes surinamensis* from the Red Sea. *Fauna of Saudi Arabia* again achieves an extremely high standard of presentation. The text is very well illustrated with numerous line drawings, coloured artwork and photos. *Published by NCWCD, P O Box 61681, Riyadh, and Pro-Entomologica, c/o Natural History Museum, Basle, Switzerland.*

From Volume 17 this periodical will be retitled *Fauna of Arabia*. This pragmatic change reflects the situation that has prevailed since Volume 5, whereby the geographical area of papers published is not restricted purely to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In recent volumes the series has included papers from all parts of the Arabian Peninsula as well as the marine life of all the seas around the peninsula.

New Books:

Phoenix aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to the study of birds and wildlife in Arabia, or to the Arabian/Middle Eastern environment generally. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned.

Alternatively, all the titles reviewed in this and earlier issues of *Phoenix* may be ordered through Subbuteo Natural History Books Ltd, Treuddyn, Nr Mold, Clwyd, North Wales, CH7 4LN, UK. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number if given. The prices shown here are published prices, which sometimes include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of preparation. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

Breeding Bird Atlas of Oman (1998)

This 35 page A5 booklet presents 128 distribution maps showing the breeding ranges of all birds breeding in Oman. It is based on observers reports received by the Oman recorder up until the end of 1997 and is published by the Oman Bird Records Committee on behalf of the Oman Bird Group. The format of the maps will be familiar to ABBA followers as it uses the same square designations and breeding evidence codes. The cut off date for information means that it is two seasons more up to date than the *Interim Atlas* maps of Oman. Also since the publication of the *Interim Atlas* a number of differences between the ABBA and OBRC databases, at individual record level, have been ironed out - this accounts for some apparent records on the *Interim Atlas* not shown in the Oman atlas. The objective of the Oman atlas, like the *Interim Atlas* is to stimulate further enquiry into breeding birds and their distribution in the Sultanate and to encourage observers to fill in some of the gaps. The maps are not accompanied by any text, e.g. on status or breeding season and his is not essential as a plenty of other publications can provide this information. This guide is small enough and cheap enough to take on field trips and flick though at the camp site or wherever one may be and see immediately whether a bird has been reported from a particular square. It is interesting to see that there are still 11 squares (of 143) in Oman for which no breeding birds have been reported, including, frustratingly, XB19 which the ill fated ABBA Survey 21 twice attempted to reach but failed in March 1997 (see *Phoenix* 14). There is a simple location/gazetteer map on the back cover. The Oman atlas was compiled by Jens Eriksen the previous recorder for Oman and is a fitting legacy for his years of hard work as recorder, especially in getting all Oman records on the OBRC database.

Card covers. Available from the Honorary Secretary, Oman Bird Records Committee , PO Box 246, Muscat 113, Sultanate of Oman price ORis1, £2.00 or $4.00 (Cash or ORis/£ cheque, price includes postage).

The Shell Birdwatching Guide to the United Arab Emirates by Colin Richardson and Simon Aspinall (1998)

What do you need if your are birding in a new country? Useful information on that country, ideas for where you can see birds, how to get to those places, what you might see at the various times of the year, some useful contacts and further reading to research what you might see or have seen. This booklet provides all those things. There are nine pages of general information about the Emirates, getting there, health, climate, tides, reference books, car hire and such things, detailed notes on 44 bird sites and a fully up to date checklist. The site guides are grouped on what can be done in a days fieldwork. These include for example the Abu Dhabi area, the East Coast, the Al Ain area etc. For each site there are summaries of useful information; including access, best time to visit, species likely to be found and a grading of site as "key site", "seasonally good" or "secondary site" (ie worth a look on the way somewhere). Sketch maps of sites and locations are provided as necessary. There are 15 colour photos of typical UAE habitats The fully updated systematic list of the 405 birds of the UAE takes up 30 pages. For each species notes are given of status (RB, SV, WV etc), and a summary of distribution, notes on the breeding season or months of occurrence as appropriate. For rarities individual dates, sites and observers are quoted. At the end there is a handy list you can tick of all species and their status and the sites where they can be seen. If you are going on a short trip to the UAE you have to take this book. It will also be a useful reference for everyone interested in Arabia birds.

Card covers, 96 pages, A5 size. Published with the support of Shell. Price £10 (includes p & p) available from Colin Richardson, c/o Hobby Publications, P O Box 50394, Dubai, UAE. ISBN 1 872839 005 3.

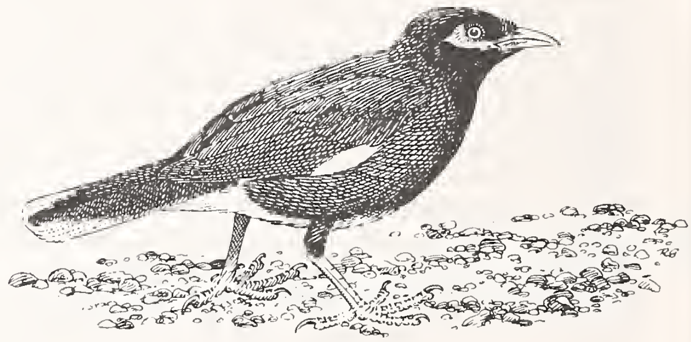


Fig 5. A flock of 31 common mynah *Acridotheres tristis* arrived on Das island in June 1998 (*Twitchers Guide* for 11June 1998). This record supports the theory that some species in the UAE which are generally thought of as 'exotic' or introduced may actually have got to the country through natural means.

Birds of Somalia by J S Ash and J E Miskell 1998

Bird people think of African birding as a listing bonanza in rich and varied tropical habitats. It is not all like that of course and in Somalia, the Horn of Africa, habitats are mostly arid desert fringe with a great number of similarities with Arabia, including the birds. There are some 650 species on the national list which is probably more than the whole of Arabia but still a long way off many African national lists (Kenya 1070 and Sudan 940). Its continental position ensures that many birds from elsewhere in Africa wander in, but a surprising number of these wanderers have only been recorded once. The Red Sea appears to deter them all from going on to Arabia. Despite the tremendous efforts of the authors, who's field work this book mainly reflects, the birds of the country are still rather poorly known. However this book shares all the available knowledge in a very readable and straightforward manner. Some 300 species are known to breed (20% more than in the whole of Arabia) with seven species endemic to Somalia which is rather less than Arabia. The breeding season in the north of the country generally coincides with Arabia with a peak from April to June. In the south of the country the peak is much less pronounced but is still generally April to July with proportionately more breeding at all other months. Main introductory chapters cover well the ornithological history of the country, vegetation, soils, geology, climate and provide a sound basis for the ornithological introductory chapters which deal with conservation, migration and breeding seasons. Appendices provide data on bird ringing recoveries, a gazetteer, a bibliography and an index. The species accounts are the main meat of the book of course. All species are mapped including migrants and vagrants and the text provides basic checklist information on status and distribution. The maps are in atlas style, the grid unit is half degree square (as for ABBA) but with only two symbols, an open circle denoting sightings and specimens and blocked circle for a breeding record. Additional lines on the maps and map text identify the distribution of races. The accompanying text is of variable length from a couple of lines for a species that has only been seen once in the country, to a half a dozen sentences for those that regularly breed, and covers status, commonality, places they occur, conservation issues, habitat, breeding regime, clutch size, dates of breeding, and colony data as appropriate. Five colour plates (by Martin Woodcock) illustrate 28 Somalia specialities. In addition there are 24 black and white photos mainly of habitats and three coloured and various other general maps. Anyone seriously interested in the birds of south west Arabia needs to have this book to be alive to the vagrant possibilities of African birds in Arabia and to appreciate how Arabian birds relate to those breeding on the nearest part of Africa. Recommended.

Hardcover and dust jacket, 336 pages (180 x 240 mm). Price £40. Published by Pica Press , The Banks, Mountfield, Nr Robertsbridge, East Sussex TN32 5JY, UK. ISBN 1-873403-58-5.

The Mammals of Ancient Egypt by D J Osborn and J Osbornova (1998)

There is a rich record of animals from ancient Egypt. This book details the mammals and is the fourth in a series of the natural history of ancient Egypt. (For details of *The birds of Ancient Egypt* see *Phoenix* 5:11). Despite its title there is a great deal in this book that relates to the present day mammalian fauna of Egypt. The authors have painstakingly gathered together a picture of the mammals of ancient Egypt from predynastic (prehistoric) rock art and dynastic (historical) artifacts, tomb goods etc. Both rock art and dynastic art are of course often highly symbolic representations of hunting scenes and battles, for a variety of magical/ religious purposes and the authors spend some time discussing specific identity. However much artwork is of such a high standard of accuracy, even field guide-like profiles that identification is straightforward. Sources range form palaeolithic and neolithic material, pecked rock art, full colour paintings from tombs, bas reliefs carved on stele, pottery, ivory carvings and mummified corpses. The majority of the book is given over to a systematic work on species identified from the various sources comparing and describing the present day and recent historical status of them. For each species/group there are general descriptions, details of their natural history and the genera and species found in Egypt today. For small species, for example hedgehogs, it is often difficult to obtain conclusive proof at species level of occurrence and some conjecture is necessary. Discussion includes for example the place the hedgehogs played in the magical or religious life of ancient Egypt or the uses the animal or its products were put to, eg for food or medicines. The skill of ancient artists coupled with the 'specimen collections' of the embalmers have allowed some 90 to 100 species to be identified precisely. Of course there are many animals on the ancient Egypt mammal list which are not on the present day list because that part of north Africa was then much more pluvial than today and species like elephants, giraffe, rhinoceros and aardvark are now associated with the plains of Africa much further south. In dynastic times hippopotamus were widespread along the Nile and the species became part of the extensive pantheon of the Pharaohs. They disappeared completely from Egypt only about 200 years ago. The book is embellished by some 650 illustrations, including photographs of live animals, ancient artwork, hieroglyphs as well as line drawings.

Laminated card covers, 223 pages (300 x 220 mm). Price £45. Distributed by La Haule Books Ltd, West Lodge, La Haule, Jersey, Channel Islands, UK. Published Aris and Philips Ltd, Teddington House, Warminster, Wiltshire, BA12 8PQ, UK. ISBN 085668 510 9

A checklist of the botanical species in Saudi Arabia by Sheila Collenette (1998)

Sheila Collenette has over the last 24 years tirelessly and painstakingly collected Saudi Arabian plants from all parts of the Kingdom. This checklist of plants illustrates just how thorough she has been. Of the 2243 species listed for Saudi Arabia she has personally collected all but 77. The list is arranged by the 142 families (837 genera) in alphabetical sequence. Against each species details are given of the author and the specimen numbers from Sheila's collection with a symbol identifying which species she considers are endemic, endangered or extinct as appropriate. Of the 246 endemic plants 156 of these are annotated as endangered and a further 500 non-endemics are also in this category. Twenty one species have probably become extinct since she began collecting in1974. Appendices to the list summarize by family the number of genera and species within each and the number of species that are endemic, endangered, unnamed and extinct. Another appendix provides field notes on the *Asclepiadaceae* and a map of their principal collection localities. This booklet will make a very relevant reference for all botanists interested in the Middle East and particularly the study of plants in the Arabian Peninsula and Saudi Arabia.

Card cover, 80 pages (A5). Price £6.00 (post free) or £7.00 by airmail. Published and distributed by the International Asclepiad Society, C/O L B Delderfield, 2 Keymer Court, Burgess Hill, West Sussex, RH15 OAA, UK. ISBN 0 9532376 0 5.

ABBA Reports by Email

Please advise the ABBA Coordinator if you wish to receive advance copies of ABBA survey reports etc by Email.

Vegetation of the Arabian Peninsula by S A Ghazanfar and M Fisher (1998)

There are more books on the plants of Arabia than any other aspect of the biology of the peninsula. This one is different from most in that it does not dwell on the species identification or plough through a huge national lists of species. Instead it , expands those subjects which most other plants books cover only briefly in introductory chapters. This book is about vegetation ecology and phytogeography, habitats and the climate and geological background for understanding the dynamics of Arabian vegetation. The climate and geology chapters are as an authoritative and up to date directory on those subjects for the whole of Arabia as you are likely to find anywhere. Species richness, endemism and conservation issues are also given much attention including a state by state round up of conservation proposals , laws and national parks . Separate chapters deal with plant communities in specific biotopes, these being montane and wadi, the plains, the sands, coastal and sabkha and water vegetation. For each, issues such as endemism, phytogeography and plant communities are discussed. There is a good chapter on 'lesser plants'(bryophytes and lichens) which are the least known components of the Arabian vegetation and for which it is difficult to find any published information on occurrences in Arabia. (When will someone publish something on the fungi?). There are also essays on the use made by man of plants in Arabia, in medicines, dyes, perfume and cosmetics, and also in building and everyday life, including fodder for animals. Illustrated throughout with dozens of graphs, maps and black and white photos of habitats. Comprehensively referenced and indexed. This book is recommended and will certainly be purchased by everyone keenly interested in Arabian vegetation. However the outrageous price for a book without colour illustrations will put off all but the dedicated.

Hardback, 363 pages (190 X 260 mm). Price £110 (US$175). Published by Kluwer Academic Publishers, P O Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands. ISBN 0-7923-5015-4

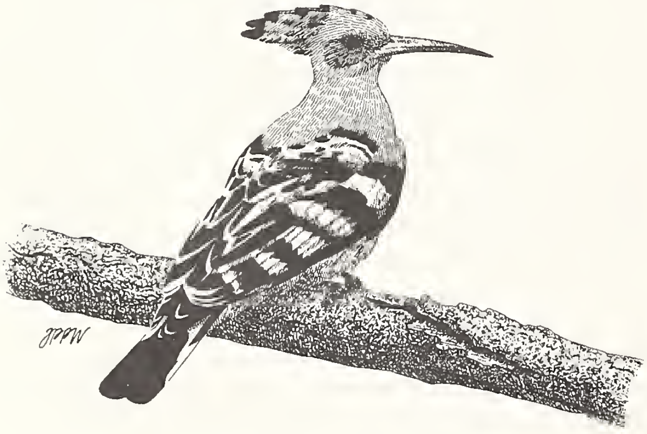


Fig 6. Hoopoe *Upupa epops* bred in Dharan (QA29), April 1998 (G Lobley), the first Eastern Province breeding record.

Blank pages in *Phoenix* 14

One or two people have reported that *Phoenix* 14, issued early 1998, had two or more pages blank. If you were the unlucky recipient of a defective *Phoenix* 14 please write in for a complete copy.

NEWS FROM HAWAR ISLANDS, BAHRAIN

Howard King, the Bahrain recorder made a study of the breeding birds of the Hawar islands during 1998 on the request of Sheikh Khalid Bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, Bahrain Minister for the environment. A full report is in preparation. The survey included an assessment of numbers and status of species, identification of which islands are holding vulnerable and rare species, health aspects of breeding populations and the activities of introduced predators. It also monitored levels of human disturbance. Howard was working on the islands on a semi permanent basis throughout the summer and autumn and he lists some very interesting observations. This year 1500 pairs of bridled terns *Sterna anaethetus* bred, as did 4500 pairs of white-cheeked tern *Sterna repressa* and 500 pairs of lesser crested terns *Sterna bengalensis*, the latter a new breeding species for Bahrain. No Saunders' terns *Sterna saundersi* were found but as they breed earlier than other species they may have finished breeding by the first midsummer visits. What is particularly exciting is a colony of Caspian terns *Sterna caspia*. Over 20 pairs were breeding including 11 in a colony. Colonial breeding by Caspian terns is very rare but is known from the Egyptian islands in the Red Sea.

In addition an incredible 412 reef heron *Egretta gularis* nests were found with an estimated 350 actively breeding pairs. This enormous total includes 350 nests on the islands of Rubud al Gharbiyah and Rubud al Sharqiyah, where 300-325 pairs were thought to have bred this year, mostly with eggs and chicks in late June. This is probably the largest concentration of reef herons ever recorded in the Middle East. The island speciality, the sooty falcon *Falco concolor* was represented by 15 breeding pairs. Autumn visits found ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* starting to occupy nests for their winter breeding season and Socotra cormorants *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* were gathering to breed, although numbers appear very much down on previous years. (See note on page 16 about mortality on the Hawar islands last year).

Over a dozen other species are confirmed breeding on these island including four lark species, rufous bush chat *Cercotrichas galactotes*, common mynah *Acridotheres tristis* and grey francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*. Recent immigrants to the island are white-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* and graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis* which have been seen around the hotel was opened this year on the main Hawar island.

Footnote: A report in the Bahrain Natural History Society Newsletter of November 1998 mentioned a Bahrain press report that 5000 Socotra cormorant eggs were taken form the Hawar colony. One of the five men involved was caught and jailed. This is thought to be the first jailing for an environmental crime in Arabia.

Email <howardk@batelco.com.bh>.

PHOENIX INDEX: ISSUES 1-15 1984 - 1998

This index of *Phoenix* Issues 1 - 15 lists all title subjects, main species dealt with (English and scientific names), authors of papers (and secondary authors), countries, places and sites. Books reviewed (item includes "(Rev.)") are listed by country and subject and are not italicised. For all entries the reference is to the first page only.

The index does not include regular announcements and notes that are repeated in each issue, advertisements, or species where more than five are dealt with in a paper.

This index will be updated from time to time. Corrections and suggestions would be welcomed.

The following abbreviations are used in the index. (The first word of an entry is not abbreviated unless it is a recognised society or organisation acronym.

Admin.; Administration
Assoc.; Association
A(s).; Author/Authors
Avif.; Avifauna
Bull.; Bulletin
Cens.; Census
Coun.; Council
Dist.; Distribution
East. Prov.; Eastern Province
Env.; Environment(al)
Exp.; Expedition
Grp.; Group
Hab(s).; Habitat(s)
Hist.; History
Ident.; Identification
Intro.; Introduction
Is.; Island(s)
Jour.; Journal
Mus.; Museum
Nat.; Natural
Newsl.; Newsletter
Orn.; Ornithological/Ornithology
Proj. - Project(s)
Pub(s).; Publication(s)
Rec(s).; Record(s)
Reps.; Report(s)
Res.; Research
Rev.; Review(s)
Soc.; Society
Studs. - Studies
Surv.; Survey(s)
Zoog.; Zoogeographic
Zool.; Zoology

Acronyms used are as follows:

ABBA - Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia proj.
ANHFSG - Ahmadi Nat. Hist. & Field Stud. Grp.
BNHS - Bahrain Nat. Hist. Soc.
BWP - *Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palearctic*
DNHS - Dubai Nat. Hist. Soc.
ENHG (AD) - Emirates Nat. Hist. Grp. (Abu Dhabi)
ENHG (AA) - Emirates Nat. Hist. Grp. (Al Ain)
HBOW - *Handbook of the birds of the World*
ME - Middle East
NCWCD - National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development
NOSY - Nature and Orn. Soc. of Yemen
NWRC - National Wildlife Res. Centre
NYOS - North Yemen Orn. Soc.
OSE - Orn. Soc. of Egypt
OSME - Orn. Soc. of M.E.
OSNY - Orn. Soc. of North Yemen
PDRY - People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
QNHS - Qatar Nat. Hist. Soc.
RAFOS - Royal Air Force Orn. Soc.
SANHS - Saudi Arabian Nat. Hist. Soc.
SBS - Saudi Biological Soc.
TNAK - Travelling Naturalists of Al Khobar
UAE - United Arab Emirates
YOS - Yemen Orn. Soc.

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Zoology in the M.E., 5:16; 7:16; 9:25; 10:13; 11:12; 12:11; 13:18, 14:13, 15:6

Eritrean Occupation of Greater Hanish Ends

On going to press news has been received that the Eritrean occupation of the Yemen island of Greater Hanish (IB04) has been resolved amicably. (See *Phoenix* 13:7). The Eritrean forces have now left, or will shortly leave, the island. Greater Hanish is a significant island group in the Middle of the Red Sea and that group, plus the islands groups of Jebel Teir, az Zuqur and Jebel Zubayr remain a gaping hole in the ABBA database.

Raptor Migration Bab al Mandab, Yemen - Spring 1998

Between 10 and 29 March we made a short research visit to Yemen to look at three aspects of the country's natural history. Our prime area of interest was to confirm the spring passage of raptors across the Bab al Mandab straits, between Djibouti into Arabia. We also investigated the occurrence of the bald ibis *Geronticus eremita* on the Laudar plains (LB04). The third part of our survey was to determine the current status of the endangered Bankoualé Palm *Livistona carinensis* in the Wadi Hajar area (OA06-OB05) 375 km north-east of Aden. The results of the bald ibis fieldwork, including the notes of Roy Wranes, who made an extensive search for the species in other parts of Yemen over two months in Spring 1998 and who joined us at Bab al Mandab, are included in the November 1998 issue of *Lammergeier*.

We had counted the autumn migration from the Djibouti side of the straits in 1985 and 1987 (Welch & Welch 1988, *Sandgrouse* 10: 26-50) and had managed three days observations in March 1990 (Welch & Welch 1991, *OSME Bull.* 26:25-26) which showed that birds left Djibouti but no-one had ever proved that they actually arrived in Yemen! Given the highly sensitive and militarised nature of the Yemen side of the straits, we felt that the possibility of such a visit was remote but thanks to the sterling efforts of David Stanton (Chairman of the Yemen Ornithological Society), permission was obtained and, together with David and Roy, we spent 21 to 25 March camped on the beach 3 km north of Ghuarayrah (JA02).

Under the prevailing weather conditions, moderate to strong east to south-east winds, this site was not ideal but was the only one we were allowed to use by our military escort. However, it did allow us to prove that the movement did take place and highlighted potential problems which would need to be overcome should a more comprehensive count be attempted in the future. With easterly winds, it was likely that many of the raptors leaving Djibouti would have made their landfall to the east of Perim in an area hidden by low hills from our count site and therefore our observations were only of the very edge of the movement.

During the four day's observation, a total of 1,644 raptors of 12 species was recorded which compared closely with our March 1990 observations from Djibouti - see table. The main species were Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus* and Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* which mirrored our experience in Djibouti. It is interesting to speculate that as the timing of the two counts were three weeks apart, it is possible that good numbers pass throughout March making Bab al Mandab the most important site in the Middle East for monitoring these species and suggesting that significant breeding populations of both species are still to be found in, Russia and central Asia.

Species	Yemen 22-25 March 1998	Djibouti 5-7 March 1990
Black kite *Milvus migrans*	1	0
Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*	773	733
Short-toed eagle *Circaetus gallicus*	0	134
Marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*	2	0
Pallid harrier *C. macrourus*	12	1
Montagu's harrier *C. pygargus*	14	2
Harrier sp	21	2
Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*	37	0
Steppe buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus*	26	0
Steppe eagle *Aquila nipalensis*	1	13
Aquila sp	1	0
Booted eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*	736	953
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*	1	0
Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*	3	1
Raptor sp	16	38
Total	1,644	1,877

In addition to the raptors, several other migrants were recorded including 44 Abdim's storks *Ciconia abdimii*, small parties of European and white-throated bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* and *M. albicollis*, a few swallows *Hirundo rustica* and yellow wagtails *Motacilla flava* ssp and two European rollers *Coracias garrulus*. On 25 March we also recorded a bimaculated lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, the third record for Yemen. A small amount of mist-nesting in the coastal mangroves was carried out by Roy which produced one marsh *Acrocephalus palustris* and two willow warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* amongst the more numerous olivaceous warblers *Hippolais pallida*.

As was the case in Djibouti, raptor passage was concentrated between 09.00 and 13.00 and outside this period we were forced to resort to the birdwatcher's standby pastime of sea-watching! This was actually quite productive with large mixed flocks of terns feeding offshore which attracted the attention of up to five pomarine skuas *Stercorarius pomarinus*. In addition there were regular records of brown booby *Sula leucogaster*, with three masked booby *Sula dactylatra* and four red-billed tropicbirds *Phaeton aethereus*.

The investigation of the population of the near-endemic Bankoualé palmin Wadi Hajar was a great success. This palm only occurs in Yemen, Djibouti and Somalia. Yemen holds the bulk of the world population. Our studies of this palm in Djibouti found about 400 trees and we understand there are about 30 trees in Somalia, whereas we counted 1357 in the Wadi Hajar area between 11 - 14 March. Our discoveries included a new site with three trees 60 km from the known sites which may indicate there are other isolated colonies where this very rare palm survives. A more detailed paper on the status and conservation of the Bankoualé palm is in preparation.

Whilst our work is Wadi Hajar was palm-oriented, we also recorded birds for the ABBA project and the following observations were of note. Throughout the wadi, blackstart *Cercomela melanura*, yellow-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*, black bush robin *Cercotrichas podobe* and Rüppell's weaver *Ploceus galbula* were common; both spotted eagle owl *Bubo africanus* and Hume's owl Strix butleri were heard calling on the outskirts of Masna'ah Bil-Ma' (OA05). The Hume's owl record is the furthest east in Yemen. Arabian waxbills *Estrilda* *rufibarba* were relatively common at both Masna'ah Bil-Ma' and El Mintaq (OA06) (maximum 23), there were three Arabian serins *Serinus rothschildi* at El Mintaq (this is the easternmost record of this endemic) and a small nesting colony of little swifts *Apus affinis* was found south of Masna'ah Bil-Ma', (the easternmost breeding record) an area which also had five Bruce's green pigeon *Treron waalia*.

Although Yemen is now a popular birdwatching destination, there is still a great deal to be discovered in areas 'off the beaten track'. This was our first visit to the country and it will certainly not be our last!

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What is a Rock Pigeon

Because rock pigeons have been domesticated in the Middle East for thousands of years and the descendants of some domesticated birds are now living wild they present some special difficulties in terms of identification and recording for ABBA. For the purposes of ABBA these pigeons have been given two species codes, truly wild rock pigeons are species code 665 and feral birds are species code 2032. Unfortunately the decision on what species code to allocate in each case can be far from straightforward. One can classify rock pigeons in Arabia into various categories but there are no clear lines between each. The categories I would like to consider in this note are what might be labelled, dovecote pigeons, feral pigeons (these include town pigeons as a sub group) and wild birds. Field guides do not usually deal with identification differences of each and most observers are prejudiced to treat every pigeon not displaying the characteristics of a totally wild bird, as 'feral'. My attempts therefore to differentiate them in Arabia is to some extent new ground but cannot be regarded as a complete answer. Readers comments on the subject will be welcomed.

In Arabia dovecote pigeons are kept for food and decoration (but apparently not for racing), they happily live and nest in dovecotes around human habitations which can range from grand apartment blocks holding thousands of birds to a few boxes and tins nailed to a central pole. They usually come and go as they please but food is supplemented by their owners. Dovecote pigeons can usually be recognised from the other categories of rock pigeon by the huge variety of colour in the flock as a whole and they can also be of various shapes and sizes if different breeds are represented. For example fantails or others birds with exaggerated features only occur as loft pigeons. They are very often quite tame, for example when feeding in fields and gardens and make rather lazy, often circular, flights around settlements. They never venture far in to the desert. They are the only category which may include abnormal behaviour, such as tumbling. Loft pigeons should not be reported to ABBA.

Feral pigeons occur in most of the larger cities of Arabia as town pigeons. It is easy to assume that town pigeons originate from domestic stock gone feral in an urban environment, however it is just as likely that some have originated from wild birds which have adopted artificial habitats in human settlements. For example one can often see truly wild birds nesting in bridges on the outskirts of town or taking up residence on tall buildings in cities. These birds are only a few steps away from becoming town pigeons. The abnormal shape and behaviour of many domestic breeds have not survived the rigours of natural selection on the street so town pigeons are usually more uniform than loft pigeons in terms of shape and colour and very often have a high proportion that are more or less of archetypal rock pigeon plumage. Town pigeons can be reported to ABBA using species code 2032, which is the code used for feral pigeons but please use the notes space on report forms to detail the circumstances.

Feral pigeons in Arabia also include those pigeons of (part) domestic origin which have returned to a truly wild lifestyle and now frequent the same habitats and exploit the same food as the ancestral rock pigeons. The ancestry of these birds is betrayed in the flock as a whole by the presence of a number of coloured birds. Whole flocks of domestic birds do not of course go feral as a unit, it is a gradual process involving, on the one hand individual birds of domesticated origin joining indigenous rock pigeon stock, and on the other hand, by previously domesticated groups, maybe including town pigeons, achieving wild status over several generations. Feral groups freely mix with truly wild birds. The domestic stock with their various colours dilute the plumage integrity of the wild birds and eventually, in some areas, almost every flock of true rock pigeons has coloured birds in it. People have often recorded (or dismissed) these as domesticated birds but in truth they are better classified as fully wild birds than feral or domesticated birds. As a rule of thumb flocks of rock pigeons which contain more than 50% birds with "colour" may be reported as feral birds code 2032. Flocks with more than 50% of birds which are of ancestral rock pigeon plumage may be reported as rock pigeons, species code 665. However in both cases the notes spaces should record the fact that there was a number of birds in the flock which had abnormal rock pigeon colouration. Of course a lot also depends on the knowledge and experience of the observer with the local pigeons. It is also well to remember that the odd bird in a flock with a spot of white in its plumage can be ignored, indeed almost any largish flock of truly wild birds will have an individual with a naturally occurring plumage aberration. (A huge flock of 1500 rock pigeons at Ibb, Yemen on 31 December 1997 included just one bird with white wings.)

From personal experience the problem of rock versus feral pigeons is most acute in Oman and the UAE. During my visit to western regions of Abu Dhabi in July 1997 (ABBA Survey 21, see *Phoenix* 14) I was struck by how very different the rock pigeons are there from those found the other side of the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia. In the UAE almost all flocks had a varying proportion of multi-coloured birds. This contrasts markedly with the situation in central Saudi Arabia where almost all birds are pure rock pigeons. Yet these UAE birds were not dovecote birds or town pigeons. They behaved in all respects as if they were truly wild rock pigeons. They had a vigorous direct flight, they flew purposefully to feeding locations in the early morning and returned to nesting or roosting locations later, just like regular rock pigeons do. This was particularly noticeable on the Ghayathi road west of Abu Dhabi (SB24/SB25) which runs south from the coast. Along the 40 km of this road there flew a light but constant stream of pigeons in both directions. They appeared to be moving to Ghayathi to feed and may have been coming from the islands in square SB25 where there have been ABBA reports of large numbers of feral birds breeding.

I believe that the majority of feral pigeons in the UAE and Oman should actually be viewed as true rock pigeons. It is just that the wild gene pool has become tainted by domesticated strains. They ought not be discounted as feral pigeons just because flocks contain coloured birds.

Many thanks to Derek Goodwin for ideas and some lively correspondence on the draft of this note.

Michael Jennings Email <arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com>.

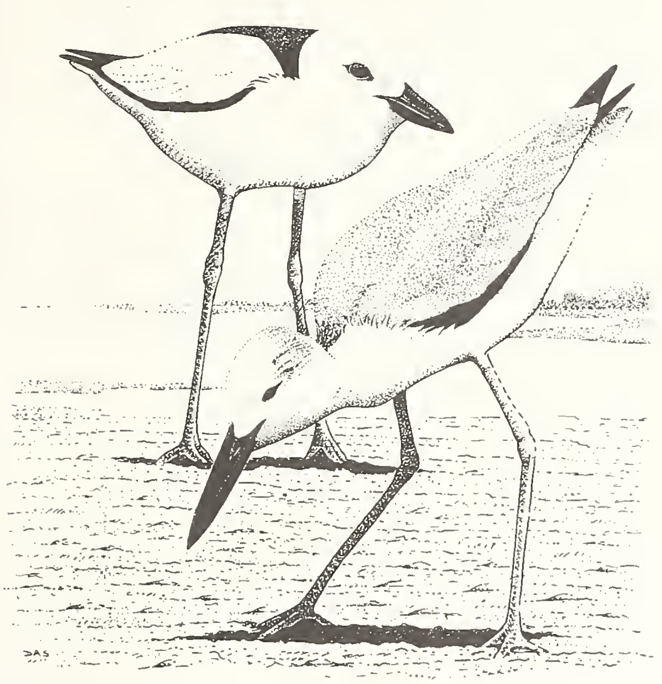


Fig 7. Crab plovers *Dromas ardeola* have sometimes been recorded many kilometres inland in eastern Arabia. Are these wandering birds or do they migrate overland, for example between the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea?

Acrocephalus and *Hippolais* Warblers - Taxonomic Change?

We have always accepted *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* as separate genera - for want of better advice, after all the species within each genus appear to exhibit superficial similarities of plumage. A recent study blows this familiar structure out of the water and proposes new species which are relevant to the Arabian avifauna and ABBA.

In *Dutch Birding* 1997 (Vol 19 No 6; pp 294-300) George Sangster outlined the new ideas on the relationships of *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* warblers which were recently put forward by Leisler and others in *J. Ornithol.* 138: 469 - 496. The review by Leisler *et al.* was based on mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) sequencing and looked at the relationships of *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* warblers. Sangster's excellent summarising article draws out what practical changes we on the ground might expect, in species taxonomy and nomenclature, if the ideas are widely accepted.

Warblers of these two genera are recognised by many as difficult to identify because of their non-descript plumage and skulking behaviour. Their somewhat uniform appearance gives little clue to their relationships. Prior to mtDNA sequencing, taxonomy relied on a range of basic and often superficial morphological characters as well as behavioural, vocalisation and habitat pointers to relationships but these characters lacked certainty and were subjective.

The main conclusions of the study are:

- Booted and olivaceous warblers should be classified among the *Acrocephalus*.

- These two species are more closely related to the large reed warblers and the small streaked species e.g. sedge and moustached warblers, than the small plain reed warblers. Other *Hippolais* warblers, such as Icterine *H. Icterina* are, taxonomically, some distance away.

- Species status should be given to the *fuscus* eastern race of the reed warbler and the common name Caspian reed warbler is suggested.

- *Fuscus* is actually more closely related to the African reed warbler *A. Baeticatus* than the European reed warbler.

- The African reed warbler should be split and the race inhabiting the mangroves of the Red Sea given specific status with the suggested common name of mangrove reed warbler.

- The Basra reed warbler is clearly of specific status and some distance from the great reed warbler.

- The group can be dealt with in future as a single genus *Acrocephalus* or split into four genera, *Notiocichla* (small plain reed warblers), *Calamodus* (small streaked reed warblers), *Iduna* (booted and olivaceous warblers) and *Acrocephalus* (large plain reed warbler).

If the proposals by Leisler *et al.* are generally accepted the list of Arabian *Acrocephalus* species would be as shown below. The list follows the order of relationship set out by Leisler *et al.*, the status in Arabia is shown for completeness.

Paddyfield warbler *Acrocephalus/Notiocichla agricola;* rare migrant.
Blyth's reed warbler *Acrocephalus/Notiocichla dumetorum;* rare migrant.
Marsh warbler *Acrocephalus/Notiocichla palustris;* common migrant.
Caspian reed warbler *Acrocephalus/Notiocichla fuscus;* common migrant and widespread but local breeder.
Mangrove reed warbler *Acrocephalus/Notiocichla avicenniae;* scarce breeding resident of Arabian Red Sea mangroves.
European reed warbler *Acrocephalus/Notiocichla scirpaceus;* migrant and possible breeder.
Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus/Calamodus schoenobaenus;* common migrant.
Moustached warbler *Acrocephalus/Calamodus melanopogon;* scarce winter visitor and local breeding resident.
Olivaceous warbler *Acrocephalus/Iduna pallida;* common migrant and breeding summer visitor.
Booted Warbler *Acrocephalus/Iduna caligata;* scarce migrant and local breeding summer visitor.
Basra reed warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis;* scarce migrant and rare breeding summer visitor.
Great reed warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceous;* migrant and

breeding summer visitor.
Clamorous reed warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus;* migrant and localised breeding resident.

For the time being ABBA will continue to use the existing nomenclature and taxonomy however this will inevitably change as the new suggested grouping makes sound sense.

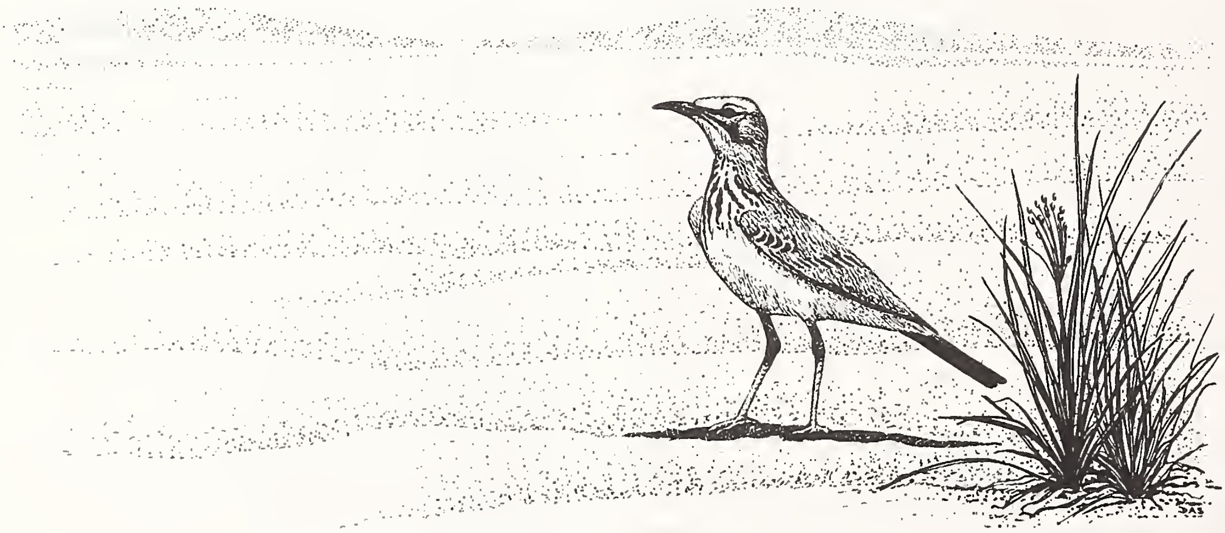
Yemen, December 1997 and January 1998

Over Christmas and the New Year 1997/8 I made an unusual visit to Arabia. I became a tourist on a cultural trip around Yemen. My partner Carol and I joined a group of 13 people on a trip that took us from Sanaa to the Wadi Hadramaut, via the Ramlat as Sabatayn, thence to the Red Sea via Mukalla and Yashbum, and back to Sanaa by Manakhah and Kawkaban. We travelled in four Toyota land cruisers and camped for six nights. This was the first time I had been a pure tourist anywhere in Arabia. Not being in control of the itinerary or the vehicle was frustrating, and not surprisingly the tour did not visit a single sewage lagoon, rubbish tip or wetland. However, against all the odds, I did see some good birds including most of the endemics and collected quite a lot of information for the ABBA database. Any trip to eastern Yemen yields new records for the database but it was still surprising to find new squares on the tourist route for such common species as yellow-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*, graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis*, fan-tailed raven *Corvus rhipidurus* and Rüppell's weaver *Ploceus galbula*. Obviously you will see a lot more birds on an organised bird tour, especially as these tend to concentrate their activities in the highlands and the bird rich Red Sea coastlands. The following is a summary of some of the breeding or resident birds seen.

The route we took is a standard one for cultural tourists. Marib was my first experience of the frustration of not being in control, and short stops at numerous sites before "everyone back on the coach" typified the rest of the trip. There are plenty of wet sites at Marib which would have been great to explore at leisure. As it was I had to be content with the stock birds which including hamerkop *Scopus umbretta*, little green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, Nile Valley sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus* and blackstart *Cercomela melanura*. From Marib the itinerary talked of "crossing the Empty Quarter". This is a bit of an exaggeration as the Ramlat as Sabatayn is a very tiny tongue of the Empty Quarter and is in fact a smooth easy drive across firm sand. The crossing did include a nights camp in the sands where an early morning half hour census found 16 Dunn's lark *Eremalauda dunni*. Near by were black-crowned finchlark *Eremopterix nigriceps*, hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes* and three bar-tailed desert larks *Ammomanes cincturus*. I counted ten kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* in this area before lunch which suggests the region is quite an important wintering area. In the Wadi Hadramaut desert lark *Ammomanes deserti* were quite numerous, they are much scarcer in the western highlands. Arabian waxbill *Estrilda rufibarba* are at their easternmost range in Tarim (PA09), African silver bill *Euodice cantans* and black bush chat *Cercotrichas podobe* were also quite numerous there.

Moving south to Mukalla we had a couple of Arabian warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena* on the jol (rocky plateaux) one of the few birds to be found in that arid upland region. Mukalla has house crows *Corvus splendens* which were much more common now than noted during my last visit in 1989 (ABBA Survey No 8). They are not found regularly elsewhere on the Indian ocean coast until near to Aden. There was a little green heron *Butorides striatus* on a wreck offshore and along the coast were numerous osprey *Pandion haliaetus* and sooty gull *Larus hemprichii*. Going west to Yashbum I saw the unmistakable nests of the Arabian golden sparrow *Passer euchlorus* in a roadside acacia bush. This record in NB05 turned out to equal the easternmost breeding record of the species in Arabia. Lichtenstein's's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* were heard on the plateau above Yashbum (MB05) on 28 December. We had an excellent camp site near Bayda (LB04) at 2060 m, just behind the top of the escarpment at Mukayras. I had dusky turtle dove *Streptopelia lugens* here which is a considerable range extension for the species from the western highlands. It was not so unexpected however as were other high altitude birds such as red-breasted wheatear *Oenanthe bottae* (also at it easternmost), South Arabian wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*, long-billed pipit *Anthus similis* and a flock of 60 'short-toed lark' which were not seen quite well enough to put them down as the red-capped lark *Calandrella cinerea* that I suspected they were. Also present here were long-legged buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, little

Fig 8. The hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes* is perhaps the only species resident throughout the Empty Quarter.



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owl *Athena noctua* and house bunting *Emberiza striolata*. At least three hares *Lepus capensis* were seen at the camp site indicating a good local population.

Back in the highlands the Dhamar, Ibb, Jibla to Taiz leg produced local specialities such as lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* (at Kitab), red-eyed dove *Streptopelia semitorquata*, stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, Yemen thrush *Turdus menachensis*, Yemen warbler *Parisoma buryi*, Arabian serin *Serinus rothschildi*, Yemen serin *Serinus menachensis*, Yemen linnet *Carduelis yemenensis*, as well as more usual species like fan-tailed raven, white-breasted white-eye *Zosterops abyssinica*, and Tristram's grackle *Onychognathus tristramii*. A huge flock of 1500 rock doves *Columba livia* were feeding in the early morning at an Ibb chicken farm on 31 Dec.

Birds seen on the Red Sea coast was disappointing, with only odd records of such things as brown booby *Sula leucogaster*, pink-backed pelican *Pelecanus rufescens*, palm swift *Cypsiurus parvus* (entering nests in doum palms), as well as Caspian, swift, lesser crested and Saunders' terns (*Sterna caspia, bergii, benghalensis* and *saundersi*) and a few other sea and shore birds. On the plains and in wadis of the foothills there were dark-chanting goshawk *Melierax metabates*, white-browed coucal *Centropus superciliosus*, Namaqua dove *Oena capensis*, grey hornbills *Tockus nasutus* and African rock bunting *Emberiza tahapisi*.

Back in the highland Arabian red-legged partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* were calling around Manakhah, griffon vultures *Gyps fulvus* were seen in a few localities (only two Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus* were seen on the whole trip), brown woodland warbler *Phylloscopus umbrovirens*, a pair of Bonelli's's eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus* were at Tawilah. (Another pair had been seen at the beginning of the trip in the mountains between Sanaa and Marib). The day before we came home I had an Arabian accentor *Prunella fagani* at Zacateen near Kawkaban.

Although I have been to Yemen twice before this was my first experience of the highlands. Compared to the highlands over the border in Saudi Arabia they were much more heavily populated, with more land under cultivation. It was disappointing to discover that in the places I visited there were no juniper trees at all, whereas forests might be expected in similar habitat in Saudi Arabia. The modest species list for the trip was hardly half of what one might expect on an organised bird trip visiting the best habitats in spring or autumn. However, my experience does show that you can do a standard tourist trip, visit the cultural sites and still see most of the endemics. Choosing a trip that includes a few days camping will greatly increase your enjoyment of the countryside but you will still need to maximise every opportunity to see birds.

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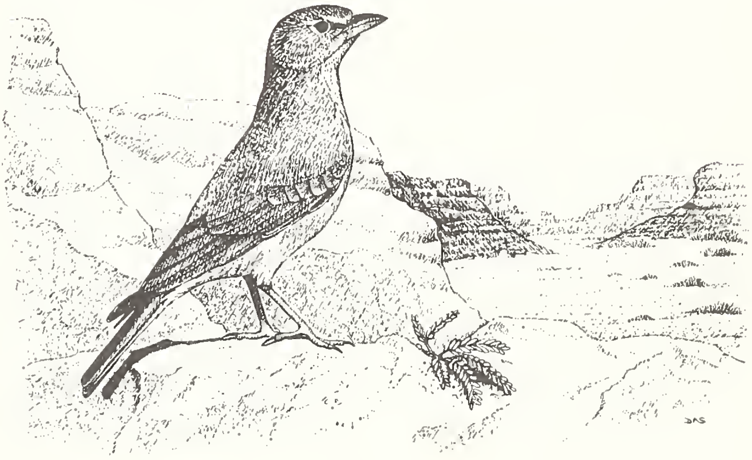

Fig 9. The desert lark *Ammomanes deserti* is much more common in the Wadi Hadramaut, eastern Yemen than in the highlands.

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Disaster Strikes Socotra Cormorant Colony on Hawar Islands, Bahrain

The Socotra cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* colony at Sawad al Janabiyah in the Hawar Islands, Bahrain is one of the largest known with estimates of between 80-250,000 pairs breeding there from year to year. I was able to visit the colony on an almost weekly basis between 28 September 1997 and early January 1998 to film and photograph the colony.

The cormorants usually arrive at the island to breed in early to mid September and the breeding season continues until the end of January. By my visit of 21 October most nests already had at least one newly hatched chick and a week later the chick population appeared to have trebled. By 10 November the asynchronous breeding of the species was becoming very evident as the colony was now clearly in two stages of development. Whilst the majority of nests had young a minority were on eggs which would have been laid during October.

The average rainfall in the Bahrain region in November is about 2 mm however a series of severe thunderstorms in November 1997 resulted in an exceptional 60 mm rainfall by the end of November 97 (Sandgrouse 20:3). There had been exceptionally heavy rain a few days before my visit of 17 November as evidenced by the very muddy conditions on the island and puddles still remaining. The normal clamouring activity of the colony with its continuos guttural murmuring was noticeably absent whilst I approached the colony area. At the colony I was shocked to find thousands of dead and still dying young. Creches of chicks seen on the previous visit had been reduced to a pile of corpses. Many young had died in the nests. The whole colony was unusually deserted enabling me walk to the centre of colony without disturbing a single bird. On closer inspection it appeared that the youngest chicks had been the most affected. Mortality of older chicks had been less. It was noticeable how gull numbers at the colony had dramatically increased since the previous week, no doubt to feed upon the corpses and abandoned eggs. The remaining larger chicks (which were still white and fluffy but about the size of adults) were very mobile by this date and were using the small bushes surrounding the colony area for shelter. Some adults were still apparently sitting on eggs but it was difficult to say whether these were birds that had laid since the devastating rains or some of those which were on eggs on 10 November .

By my next visit on 23 November it seemed that much of the colony had been replenished and it was difficult to judge the extent of the loss. However Howard King, the Bahrain Natural History Society Bird Recorder, thought that the colony had lost possibly 50% of its eggs and young during the storms.

On subsequent visits adults were noted to be still on eggs until 28 December. Egg laying in December is rare in the Hawar islands and it seems at least possible that some of them had been replacement clutches by pairs that had lost eggs or young in November. By this time many of the remaining chicks were full grown and were actively exercising their wings and being coaxed to fly by adults.

In discussing these events with others since it seems that the abnormally heavy rains in Bahrain during November might have been just one more example of the worldwide exceptional climatic events experience during late 1997 (the El Niño effect). The heavy rains would have had an adverse effect on the Socotra cormorant colony in a variety of ways. Nests which became inundated would mean eggs would get chilled and die, especially if adult birds were also wet. The soft down of young chicks would act like a sponge to the rain leaving them wet and cold over long periods. Eventually becoming hypothermic and die. No doubt some very young chicks actually drowned as a result of the nesting depressions becoming full of water. It would seem that the creche tendency of young of this species, from a relatively early age, whilst no doubt providing protection in other ways is detrimental during cold and wet weather. Creched birds are not regularly brooded by adults and their soft down (which is not yet water resistant) would soon chill them leading to hypothermia. Older young with more mass would probably we better able to manage the temperature drop and recover their thermoregulation.

Michael Hill (Jun) , Cavendish Hall, Nottingham University, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2QL.
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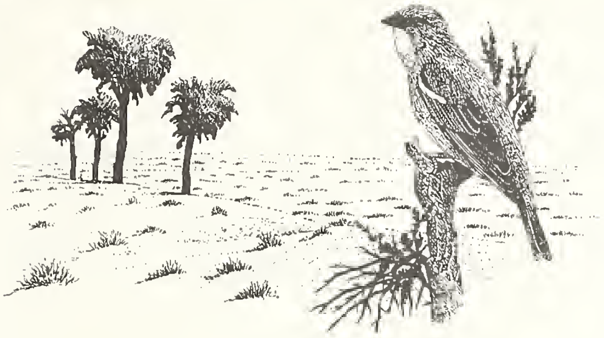

Fig 10. Yellow-throated sparrows *Petronia xanthocollis* are a breeding summer visitor to Arabia from the Indian region.

ABBA and *Phoenix* Notes and Notices

Records still needed

Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. For example were there house sparrows *Passer domesticus* in Abu Dhabi in 1960? No one seems to know for sure. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly unusual breeding species are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for the common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 1998 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc.

How to obtain *Phoenix*

One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is also available on subscription for a single payment of £20 for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 16 to 20 inclusive. Because of the excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in sterling notes or the equivalent in foreign currency notes. *Phoenix* Nos 1-14 are available at £2 each (or the set for £18) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. All subscribers will receive a reminder when their next subscription is due. Will subscribers and observers please remember to advise any change of address.

Photos needed for *Phoenix*

Photos of Arabian breeding birds, their nests, eggs and habitats etc are welcomed for inclusion in future issues of *Phoenix*. Photos may be printed with just a caption, for their aesthetic value, or can be submitted to illustrate notes and papers. Submitted photos may be in colour or black and white (glossy or matt), slides, prints or negatives, so long as they have good contrast.

Contributions to *Phoenix*

Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. There is no charge for notices, requests for information and advertisements of reports, publications etc. Articles may be submitted on disk (please state software) typed or handwritten. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

The *Phoenix*

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ABBA Survey Reports and Summaries

To date, 23 ABBA Surveys have been completed, they have reached almost every part of Arabia from the Gulf of Aqaba to Ras al Hadd in Oman and the Kuwait border to Aden. For each survey a summary report is prepared which includes the itinerary, a map and details of unusual observations etc. This is followed later by a full report prepared for the NCWCD, providing all the information collected on bird distribution and numbers. In line with the ABBA policy of making all information collected by the project available to those who want to use it, the summaries and full reports are copied to relevant libraries, museums and societies. In addition, a small number are available for sale. Full reports of Surveys Nos 4 to 16, and summaries of all 23 are currently available. (See details on page 15).

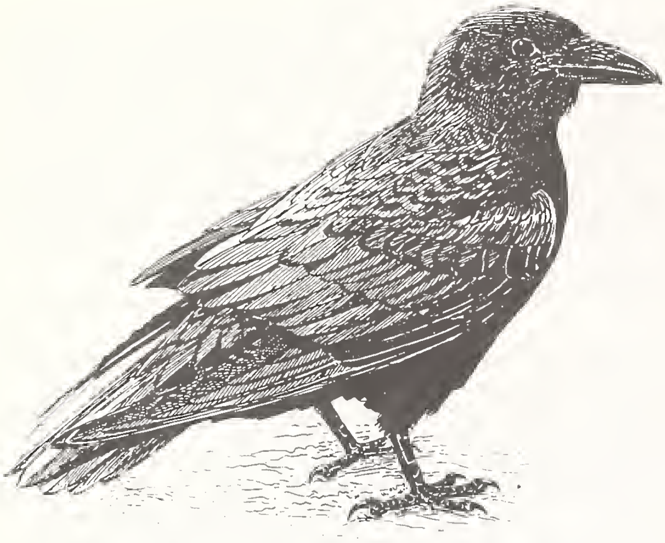
Index to *Phoenix* 1-15

An index to the contents of *Phoenix* Nos 1-15 is included in the centre pages of this issue. The index covers all subjects of articles, main species dealt with, (English and scientific names), authors and secondary authors, countries, places and sites. Books reviewed are listed by country and subject. Comments on the future updates and arrangement of this index would be valued.

Final Atlas - Draft Species Account

The format for the species accounts of the final atlas will generally follow the well tried layout found in a number of regional atlases. Each account will be accompanied by a line drawing , a map of course and world distribution map. The map will include different sized blobs to denote possible, probable and confirmed breeding and a colour code for age of records. The final layout will be decided shortly . The following sample species account for brown-necked raven is one of the longer ones so far prepared.

"The typical crows *Corvus* spp. include the largest passerines and comprise a very successful genus with 40 species (Goodwin, 1967). Crows occur in a wide variety of terrestrial habitats in almost every corner of the world, except South America, Antarctica or New Zealand. Three species breed in Arabia.



Brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis*

The Brown-necked or Desert Raven is one of the typical Eremian region species, occurring throughout the desert belts of the Old World. Two races are recognised, the nominate one occurring throughout the above range except for north east Africa and Somalia where *edithae* occurs. The Brown-necked Raven has previously been treated as a race of the Common Raven *C. corax* but now is widely regarded as a full species. In Arabia birds from the Farasan islands in the Red Sea have been reported as being heavier billed and showing more extensive brown compared to mainland birds. Also from the Farasans, partial albinistic individuals have been noted. In the western Arabia highlands and some parts of central Arabia this raven is often observed associating with the Fan-tailed Raven *C. rhipidurus*. It is readily distinguished from that species by its longer tail and the Fan-tailed Raven is rarely found far from rock outcrops. The Brown-necked tolerates much more arid conditions that the Fan-tailed Raven.

The Brown-necked Raven is a widespread resident species, occurring in pairs and family groups for most of the year but often flocking after the breeding season until late autumn. It inhabits a wide variety of habitats occurring on some of the larger islands (Farasan, Masirah, Socotra), mountain tops (at or over 3,000 m in western Arabia and northern Oman) and in the extremely arid sandy wastes of the Empty Quarter. It is scarce or very local in southern Arabia and appears to be entirely absent from the south coastal region of Dhofar and Al Hawf region of the Oman/Yemen border, which catches the monsoon. There is little evidence of any historical change in either range or numbers except that it became extinct in Bahrain in 1971, possibly as a result of hunting. Also records suggest it is becoming increasingly scarce in the UAE, possibly due to the spread of urban areas and cultivation. It appears to avoid large irrigated areas, such as pivot irrigation schemes. It shuns agricultural and built up areas, except when flocking after breeding. It is generally resident wherever it occurs. No movements are known but post breeding flocking occurs generally from July to October. Sometimes flocks of 100 can be seen as early as May. Near Riyadh flocks built up from 300 in late June to 4-500 in July and August, reducing to 300 in October, with one group of 200 as late as 28 November. Six days of field work during ABBA Survey 22 to the Liwa and western Abu Dhabi failed to find a single raven and other observations suggest that numbers are severely depleted from large areas of their desert breeding areas during the flocking period.

During the ABBA period this species was one of the easiest to find and to prove breeding as its nests are readily found and often easily inspected. Coverage has generally been good. The gaps on the maps, in the Empty Quarter, the Great Nafud and eastern Yemen, are more likely to represent poor observer coverage rather than the absence of ravens. Indeed this species is probably the only bird that occurs throughout the Empty Quarter. Although they are widespread in the Empty Quarter, population levels there are low, except by highways. A 166 km transect of sand dunes in the south west part of the Empty Quarter in March, failed to find any ravens, but during a 594 kms drive along a highway at the same time in the same region, 38 ravens were counted. Birds probably concentrate near roads for greater food availability from spilt grain, road kills, rubbish from vehicles and the like. They also find more nest sites by roads in the form of telegraph poles, buildings, pylons etc, than in the surrounding desert. In the poorest deserts a pair of ravens probably occupies a nesting territory of about 40,000 ha., or about seven pairs in each atlas square. The population estimate for Arabia is 21,000 pairs based on the above density for the Empty Quarter (300 squares) and three times that density elsewhere (900 squares).

This species appears not to need a permanent water supply to survive, and even when water is available in hot weather it does not seem to go out of its way to drink. It feeds on carrion, digs in the ground for invertebrates (including the large beetle grubs that burrow just under the surface of dunes) and takes birds eggs and young if it can find them. Highways are attractive to them, especially parking lay-bys, because they often mean a sure supply of food scraps. They also attend temporary desert camps including bedouin tents for scraps. This behaviour, and their fondness of man's rubbish and scraps, make it difficult to understand why they do not occur more often in towns and villages. They also associate with domestic stock, perching on camels apparently searching for parasites, and around sheep and goat flocks, possibly taking disturbed insects.

Nesting is exclusively in the spring in Palearctic Arabia, birds pair by November and nests are usually under construction or occupied by late February. Nest sites are extremely variable. The preferred site is a tree, especially acacia or other thorny species such as *Maerua* or *Zizyphus*, but they will use any tree, including a date palm, if that is all that is available. Small flimsy waist-high shrubs are used to support a nest in remote regions, such as the Empty Quarter where ground predators are scarce and nest bushes are hidden in folds among the dunes. Rocks and cliffs seem to be a secondary choice for nests but really any structure will suffice if the nest is a metre or more off the ground, away from ground predators. Some range of nest sites have included the top of a 100 m microwave pylon, on a roadside telephone box, well markers in the oil fields (barrel on pole), the loop of a disused basketball pole and on top of 2 m high pile of rusting wire. On a Red Sea island the old nest of an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (at ground level) has been used and the ravens have been known to dispute a pylon nest site with an Osprey. Brown-necked Ravens are scarce or absent in many parts of northern Arabia, perhaps because of the lack of trees and bushes on which to place nests. In this area, like many other regions devoid of trees, the tall microwave relay towers (every 20-50 km) are used for nesting but they do not nest on such towers if they are in towns or built up areas. The main structure of the nest is always twigs, but scraps of cloth and plastic may be woven in. The nest is lined with softer materials, mainly goat and camel hair, wool, down, grasses, feathers and cloth, sometimes much paper. Egg laying is mainly in late February and early March but can be as early January (eastern Arabia). Nesting is latest in the mountains of the south west where young are sometimes in the nest until June. The clutch/brood size reflects the conditions for feeding young. Nests in the arid south and central parts of the peninsula often have only two eggs. In contrast a clutch of seven was once recorded after good rains, in an area with numerous trees and shrubs and stock animals. Of 18 clutches recorded on the ABBA database 7 has four eggs and 4 had five eggs, however of 27 nests containing young 8 had two and 8 had three young, and no nest raised five young to fledging, suggesting that a significant loss of eggs and nestlings. There is no evidence of double or replacement broods. Nesting brown-necked ravens, like most large corvids, show great hostility to birds of prey in the vicinity of their nests and harass (usually as a pair) even the largest raptors including Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* and Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* until they are out of the area. They have also been known to mob people near nests. There appears to be no particular animosity with the Fan-tailed Raven where the two species occur side by side. They are found in mixed flocks after the breeding season, especially at rubbish dumps and the like. However on occasions one species has been seen to aggressively chase the other, usually in situations where one is nesting. More often than not this has been the brown-necked chasing the fan-tailed.

The brown-necked Raven remains a successful and numerous species in Arabia, well able to survive in the most arid of environments and at present is not a subject for conservation concern. However its apparent avoidance of urban and irrigated areas when breeding may mean its traditional habitats areas are being encroached upon which could result in a population reduction. More information is needed in this respect. It is occasionally shot, nestlings are sometimes taken (Kuwait) and used to trap falcons and it is sometimes electrocuted by certain types of overhead power lines. Remains of Brown-necked Raven have been found in Golden Eagle nests but it has few other enemies.

Population (prs): Bahrain nil (extinct 1971), Kuwait 10, Oman 3500, Qatar 10, Saudi Arabia 14000, UAE 1000, Yemen 2500.”

Society News:

Yemen Ornithological Society and *The Lammergeier*

Details of the YOS newsletter and of membership are available from the Chairman, David B Stanton, Yemen Ornithological Society, PO Box 2002, Sana'a, Republic of Yemen. Telephone number 9671269314, fax 9671234438. (Email <DavidStanton@qsi.org>.

Fig 12. There were breeding records of black-necked grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* from the mid 1980s in Qatar and south west Arabia, but none since. Have conditions not been right for them again or is it a case of inadequate observer coverage?

NEWS FROM SOCOTRA

The following report has been received from Dr Wolfgang Wranik who has experience and knowledge of the biology of Socotra from a number of expeditions to the island during the last 15 years. He has recently completed a two week pilot study on Socotra (September 1998) for more detailed surveys in 1999.

The study was in preparation for a detailed floristic and faunistic multidisciplinary survey in 1999. The faunistic interest during the pilot was mainly focused on invertebrates and reptiles but there were also some bird observations. The opportunity was also taken to make detailed enquires with the local people about their attitude to and utilisation of, the island's flora and fauna.

The local people speak Soqotri, a language unique to the island and have names for the larger, more striking birds or those species important to them. They trap birds commonly for food especially grackles, doves and sparrows, using a variety of methods including net traps, baskets baited with dates and bird lime sticks. They make the lime out of a gum-like substances secreted from *Euphorbia socotrana*. The local people appear to have no special interest in birds of prey but they may persecute brown-necked raven *Corvus ruficollis* which they believe attack young livestock. It is interesting that the house crow *Corvus splendens* has arrived on Socotra recently. The local people believe that the species was deliberately brought to the island by boat from Aden, but this may be a misunderstanding of the well documented ability of the species to join a ship in one harbour and leave it at another. Wolfgang recorded four house crow at Hadibo, the capital, in October 1997 and this year he counted about 15. He warns that in view of the problems experienced with this species in Aden the risk to the endemic fauna of Socotra should not be underestimated. Wolfgang also reports that the local people talk of a second species of owl on the island. The scops owl *Otus senegalensis* is well known from Socotra but the local people talk of another owl with no ear tufts. The Liverpool Museum expedition to Socotra of a century ago reported hearing an owl on a number of occasions that sounded like the tawny owl *Strix aluco*. Could the mystery owl heard by that earlier expedition and the second owl reported by local people be the same species? A good candidate might be Hume's owl *Strix butleri*, which occurs in dry rocky habitats on the Yemen mainland and is the only Arabian owl which sounds like *S. aluco*.

In view of the uniqueness of the fauna and flora of Socotra and the high level of endemism the government of Yemen has framed new regulations to govern scientific activities on the island. In future research workers and especially those collecting specimens, will need a permit from the Environmental Protection Council in Sanaa. The permit will require undertakings from researchers in respect of the further processing of material collected.

Email <wolfgaug.wranik@biologie.uni-rostock.de>.

Credits

Word processing Lorraine Russell. Artwork; striated scops owl, crab plover, hoopoe lark, desert lark, yellow-throated sparrow , Yemen thrush, Dave Showler; woodchat shrike, little ringed plover, hoopoe , black-necked grebe, Jan Wilczur, common mynah, Robert Gilmore; brown-necked raven, CJF Coombs; maps, MCJ. Printed by Printroom and Lake Shore Graphics, 12 Northern Court, Vernon Road, Nottingham, NG6 0BJ, UK.

Address

All correspondence for the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia project and *Phoenix* should be sent to: Michael C Jennings, ABBA Co-ordinator, 1 Warners Farm, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE17 3HW, UK. Telephone and Fax, 01487 841733 (International 00 44 1487 841733).
Email <arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com>.

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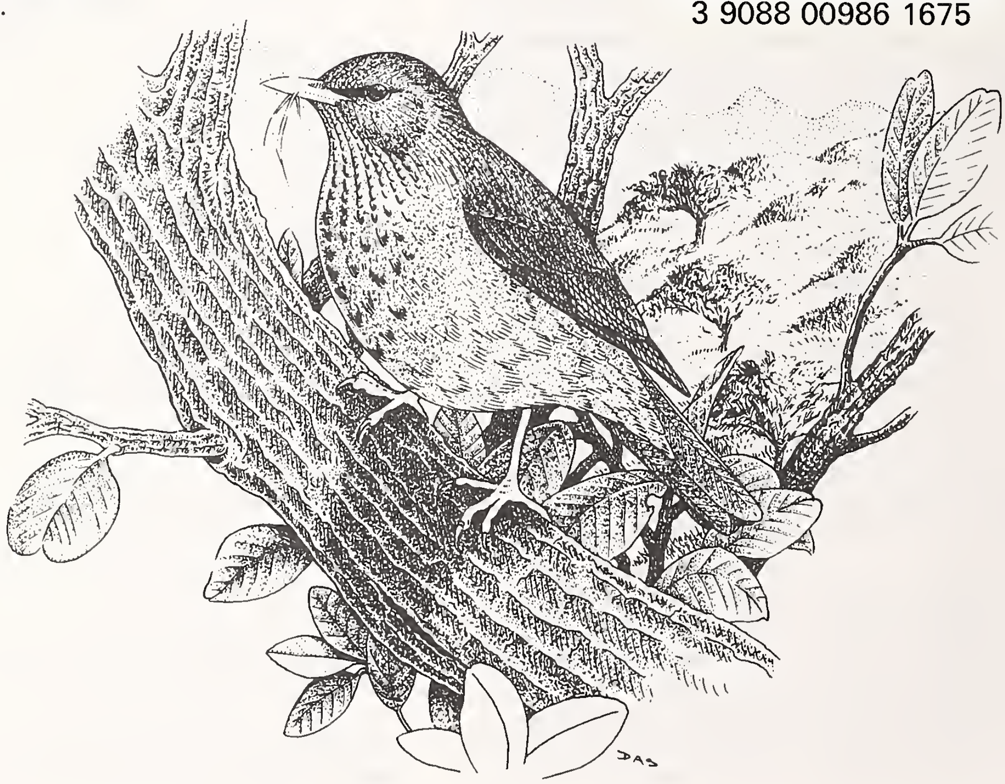

Fig 13. Four or five pairs of Yemen thrush *Turdus menachensis* were found in a hotel garden at Abha (IA13) in late April 1998, they were nest building and feeding fledged young at the time (G Lobley).